Shifting Spheres

Call for Papers to a special issue of *Kybernetes* [Clarivate Impact Factor: .980]

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**Focus:**
The concept of publicity as a sphere was first introduced to scientific discourse by Jürgen Habermas in the 1970's and has had a remarkable career ever since. In this special issue of *Kybernetes*, we want to turn our attention to three thematic spheres surrounding the concept of the sphere:

1. *The concept* itself. This may include its origins, its history, and its potential, as well as its limitations. At this meta-theoretical level, comparisons between the ostensibly antagonistic theoretical perspectives of systems theory and the theory of communicative action of the two become possible. As a consequence, the concept of sphere may create a theoretical sphere for discussing the extent to which the central aspects of both perspectives are compatible, and further, at which junctures they might even be coupled.

2. The question of which *structural and semantic transformations* the so-called ‘public sphere’ and ‘private sphere’ have undergone in recent decades, particularly with regard to globalization and the digitization of society.

3. *The idea of transformation* itself. What is it exactly that defines change in contrast with its opposite—i.e., the perseverence and consistency of structures?

The driving contention of this Special Issue is this: despite its limitations, the concept of sphere is a rich theoretical resource that, if freed from its normative implications, can be effectively deployed in order to analyze current social situations.

**Prompts and Questions:**
I. While social theory has managed to divorce the concept of the sphere from its once religious background as a divine descriptor of the heavens, it has not managed to fully eliminate its spatial connotations.

Although Habermas himself defines “the public sphere as a virtual or imaginary community which does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space,” it is nevertheless the space-boundedness of the concept that dominates his considerations of the objects towards which it is directed: Britain's coffee houses, the salons of France, or Germany's *Tischgesellschaften*. “Opinion became emancipated from the bonds of economic dependence” in French salons, Habermas argues, continuing: “The salons not only created a forum for self-expression but became platforms for airing one’s opinions and agendas for public discussion.” Even the collective body constituted by and through this process—the so-called public—is not free from these spatial associations.

To this day, the theoretical capacity of the concept of the sphere itself has yet to be properly investigated—as if it were merely a metaphor that demanded no further conceptual clarity, whose often taken for granted spatial implications were never to be taken too seriously. It is hardly a coincidence that, in the particular form of Peter Sloterdijk’s *Spheres Trilogy*, modern philosophy took up the concept of the sphere as the basis of a fundamentally space-oriented metaphysics. Indeed, it might precisely be this sort of terminological vagueness with which the Trilogy treats the sphere that makes the concept so attractive as a subject of speculation (i.e., metaphysical small talk). Even the terms 'filter bubble' and 'echo chamber’ immediately reveal themselves to be manifestations of the sphere concept’s spatial heritage.
While the application of the inner/outer distinction to spaces is relatively straightforward (e.g., Sloterdijk moves from the fetus to ‘bubble pluralism’ in a theoretical application of the concept of polycontexturality, spatialized), the question of which discursive and/or social boundaries define a sphere is more difficult to approach. Luhmann’s attempt towards a solution was to focus on the limits established by communication itself, thus allowing a concatenation of communications—called ‘system’—to be analytically separated from their environment. This concept was particularly useful in rendering the mechanisms of the mass media and their relation to the public comprehensible, since this new public sphere could now be described as a non-spatial sphere constituted by acts or practices. Nevertheless, systems theory also continues to struggle to free the system concept from all spatial connotations. Bearing the legacy not only of its biological conceptual origins (i.e., the context of the autopoietic reproduction of the cell) along with the typical visual depiction of systems as spherical, the frequency of academic (e.g., in Simmel) as well as colloquial appeals to phrases like that of the ‘social circle’ only increases the difficulty of theorizing systems in a truly non-spatial mode.

Of course, one alternative route towards overcoming the idea of the public as a sphere is to suspend it altogether in favor of the concept of medium. Taken in Heider’s sense, the public can then be understood as a loose coupling of opinions that are capable of condensation into strict couplings. (Contemporary applications may include, for example, the condensation of xenophobic and/or racist opinions into national-level trends, but also the public debate surrounding Trump’s zero-tolerance policy that resulted in the public demand for the executive branch to put an end to the separation of children from their families, thus demonstrating the political potential of the public.)

Possible questions:

- What does the concept of the sphere has to offer beyond helpful but always trivializing visualizations?
- How can boundaries between communicative spheres be defined?
- Can the concept of the public sphere be liberated from the normative implications of—for example—democracy, equality, and consensus as its preconditions?
- How can irrationality be integrated into the sphere concept?
- What are the possible couplings between Critical Theory and Systems Theory in relation to the sphere concept? For instance, how might the concept of dialectics relate to the figure of re-entry, to the idea of coupling, or to the concept of the system itself—the last of which always includes its counterpart, the environment?

II. One reason for the conceptual success of the public sphere is the apparent plausibility of a design that poses the private sphere as its opposite, positing a neat binary wherein what is private is not public, and vice versa. Deriving from the classical distinction between Oikos and Polis, which assumes that the sphere or space of family can be separated from the sphere of the city, this joint conceptualization of public/private also directly pertains to another binary of great importance to social theory: inclusion vs. exclusion. In Habermas’ own description, the public is “open to all, in contrast to closed or exclusive affairs” of which the private sphere is constituted.

In the digital era, however, it appears that any clear separation between public and private can no longer be maintained. Of course, the concept of sphere was always ‘dialectic’ in its composition—the public sphere produced by the coming together of private individuals discussing publicly relevant private issues, as a consequence of which private law was at first political law, ius civilis. But only by way of social media have hybrid forms of public privacy and the private public achieved their massive contemporary breakthrough. Previously controlled by classes of gatekeepers (first the bourgeoisie, then the journalists), the filter function between the two spheres—and also that by which their differentiation was maintained—has been replaced by algorithms.

An earlier critique of the notion of publicity, though, identified it as a discursive ideal or utopia. Characterized as a ‘no-place’ place where individuals could come together in order to identify societal problems and arrive at a group consensus by way of rational discussion, the public sphere was viewed
as one of the foundations of the program of democracy. According to Habermas, the same forces that initially established this sphere eventually destroyed it (primarily as a consequence of a consumeristic drive that infiltrated all levels of society); but this utopia of rational and universalistic politics, free from both the economy and the state, was nevertheless conceived as once extant—imperfect and impermanent as it may have been. Nancy Fraser disagrees, stating that “this network of clubs and associations - philanthropic, civic, professional, and cultural - was anything but accessible to everyone,” and perpetually prevented outside groups from articulating their particular concerns. Lisa Gitelman similarly speaks of a far less-than-ideal space “in which some voices, some expressions, were legitimate - and legitimated - while others were constrained.” Luhmann’s critique focused on the idea of consensus in Habermas, which he regarded as practically impossible (simply put: one can ‘say yes’ and still be opposed). Moreover, for Luhmann, dissent plays a far more important role than consensus as a motor of social evolution.

Possible questions:

- To what extent can Habermas' reflections on the decline of the public sphere (the language of ‘decline’ here is morally neutral, referring to its foundational restructuring) be transferred to current developments?
- Are we experiencing a similar transformation to that which Habermas described with respect to the mass media, except that in this case, it is the mass media losing influence and being 'infiltrated' by the social media?
- Is the exclusion of certain voices from the public discourse the reason for the outburst of right-wing protest movements we are currently witnessing? (And how could the relationship between these movements and politics be described?)
- How can we aptly describe today's struggle over the control of communication flows?
- What role does the traditional mass media sphere play in the rise of nationalism and racism? To what extent are the empathy and political correctness processed in the mass media responsible for the outbreak of political impropriety and/or incorrectness?
- What transformations have the mass media itself undergone in recent decades? Have they indeed turned from a watchdog to an attack dog? If so, is Trump’s bashing of the corporate media machine partially justifiable?
- Why does the mass media feel compelled to redistribute Donald Trump's Twitter messages, even though they are not public press releases from the US government?
- What new actors have entered the public arena that - according to Habermas - was dominated by professionals in the media system and politicians?
- How can the polemics of echo chambers and filter bubbles be overcome in favor of a sober analysis of filter functions? What filter functions of the social media, the mass media, politics and other social spheres can be identified?
- How are new public spheres such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter different from one another?
- What effect does anonymity have with respect to the expression of public communication?
- How far is the scientific discourse on the public sphere already conditioned by normative assumptions?
- What are and/or might be the benefits of status inequalities (e.g., professional vs. amateur) in the public sphere?
- Do citizens who neglect and/or reject a rational debate in favor of their own emotions live in darkness?
- Is the very future of democracy at stake? Should we—especially after Brexit and Trump—continue to assume the primacy of the program of democracy?
- Does conceptualizing the public as an actor/unit actually make sense?
If—as the theory of the social sphere stipulates—the government's policies should be guided by listening to the public sphere, what exactly is it that policy makers are and/or should be listening to?

How can the vagueness of public opinion as a felt/imagined sentiment be translated into facts beyond the ballot box/voting—i.e., in politics?

Is it still even helpful to talk about a public sphere in contemporary theory? How many public spheres are analytically suitable?

What will become of ‘reality’ if the institutions responsible for verification (independent media, courts, science, & etc.) lose their competitive advantage? Is the post-factic age already a fact?

What alternative narratives of the public sphere can be generated that refrain from perpetuating the dominance of the mass media in favor of other media?

How does the digital revolution, exemplified by the assumed sphericality of the internet, of cyberspace, change pre-digital concepts of the public sphere?

How does globalization intersect with the public sphere? Is there a global public sphere that operates at a supranational level?

What options are available for determining what constitutes the ‘private’ beyond existing legal definitions?

Does the distinction (a fatal one, according to Luhmann) between private and public law in the digital era still make sense? Did it ever?

Does public opinion really have no other function than to serve as a critical sounding board for political action? Is there no other kind of publicity?

III. In his description of modern society, Luhmann was not concerned with the contents of societal change, but rather with what it is that brings such change about. The latter, he argued, has actually remained largely unchanged; and despite digitization and globalization, he insinuated that there has not been a true epochal shift affecting the foundations of the functionally differentiated society itself. Still, within this persisting structure he observed remarkable structural changes, especially with regard to mutual stress. But for him, modernity itself prevails—albeit in an intensified form—as hyper-modernity. In contrast, there are considerations which, in following Habermas' reflections on the emergence of a new civil society in the eighteenth century, predict the emergence of a new society in this century—a next society (i.e., a new epoch) that differs in its essential characteristics from the present one.

Possible questions:

- What is the relationship of change to its observation and anticipation (#self-fulfilling prophecy)?
- How do the ‘liking’ and taking-for-granted of facts relate to the social recognition of truth?
- Will the functional differentiation survive the digital transformation of society?
- Will there be another new shift in time semantics in the transition to the next society?
- What theoretical possibilities does the distinction of structure and semantics provide for describing the change?
- Alternatively, is it necessary to exchange them for another distinction?
- (Why) Is systems theory –better equipped than other sociological theories to describe the shifting spheres’ as, for instance, Dirk Baecker argues?
- What possibilities for further theoretical development does systems theory hold that could do justice to the new circumstances?
- How can the relationship between the subsequent costs of functional differentiation and the subsequent costs of global networking be described?
- Should we understand the internal operations of the computer as already comprising communication? Or should we follow Niklas Luhmann in believing that the beautifully designed
interfaces between the computer and its users merely invisibilize the otherness of the machines?

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